

**Minutes of the  
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE  
BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST**

1430, Monday 31 March 2008  
Education Barn, Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Mr P Glyn (Chairman), Mr M Cooper, Mr J Harding (Forestry Commission), Cllr M Hoy, Mr C Marrable (Conservation Officer), Dr H Prendergast (Clerk), Mr J Spicer, Mr E Stenhouse and Dr A Tait (ESCC Ecologist).

Also present: Cllr J Barnes

The Chairman opened the meeting, welcomed the member of the public present and invited questions for 10 minutes from the floor.

*The following notes on the questions/ answers are an aide memoire only and do not form part of the minutes of the Meeting of the Conservation Committee.*

*Mrs Anne Haig McVitty tabled a written question regarding further public consultation on the draft Forest Plan.*

**The Chairman thanked Mrs Haig McVitty for her question. Cllr Barnes replied that the draft Forest Plan introduction was currently being re-written. He confirmed it would then pass via the Executive Committee into the cycle of meetings taking into account comments that had been made at recent Stakeholder meetings. He went on to say that the revised plan would not go through a further formal consultation process but that it would be revisited every year taking into account any comments from the public.**

*Mrs Haig McVitty stated she would have liked to have had a further opportunity to make comments and hoped to be able to do so in the future.*

**The Chairman thanked Mrs Haig McVitty for her question and asked the Clerk to respond. The Clerk stated that many comments on the Plan had been received. He went on to say that any agreements made in June by the Board would not be 'cast in stone'. Cllr Barnes went on say he welcomed Mrs Haig McVitty's vision.**

**10/08 Apologies**

Mr L Gillham, Mr C Johnson (Archaeologist ESCC), Mrs J Robertson (NE), Cllr R St Pierre.

**11/08 Declarations of Interest**

There was none.

**12/08 Financial information for this cost centre**

Mr Spicer queried the amount shown for chipping. Mr Marrable responded that the figure shown was a contingency figure.

**13/08 Consider the recommendations in the paper 'An examination of the arisings from heathland management on Ashdown Forest and their disposal'**

The Chairman thanked Mr Marrable and Mr Stenhouse for their efforts with this paper. Mr Cooper stated that he found it helpful and informative. Cllr Barnes stated that he too had benefited from the document and stated that clarification on estimates, to meet existing needs, was required. He went on to say that, although he considered the conclusions were correct, an

indication of the timescales for the desk-top study would be helpful. Mr Marrable replied that the once the Woodland Management Plan (minute 14/08) had been discussed and decisions made the two plans would come together well. There was a short discussion regarding the changing nature of the market place for arisings and how the drive to encourage domestic composting had impacted on the market. Mr Marrable stated that the value of scraping as a management tool was difficult to quantify financially. Dr Tait stated it was recognised that scraping was an effective management tool but expensive. He went on to say that the benefit of scraping was its effectiveness for heathland restoration rather than its economic benefit from arisings and that any offset of costs was welcome.

**It was agreed that in section 6, Recommendations to the Board, the wording should be amended to read, 'When dealing with lop and top close to properties and roads that chipping, using existing facilities, be the preferred option'. It was agreed the first and third recommendations be endorsed.**

**14/08 Consider the recommendations in the 'Woodland management plan briefing paper'**

The Woodland Management Plan had been pre-circulated to the Committee. The Chairman commented that this paper, which was a summary of the current position, had been looked at by the Chairman and centre staff and a consensus reached. Mr Stenhouse asked if everyone on the Committee had read the Woodland Management plan in its entirety. He went on to say that it gave a good full description and ideas about what could be done. Mr Spicer stated that the plan could not move forward if it had not been read by everyone on the Committee. There was a lively discussion regarding the background to the drafting of the briefing paper and the benefits of reading the full plan. The Chairman stated that the full plan was a very detailed and technical document and, although some Committee members may not understand the details of forestry, everyone understood the financial aspects. Cllr Barnes stated that the Woodland Management Plan should be prioritised and drafted on the basis of limited resources being available, AND further detailed and costed options be included should further funding become available in the future, while ensuring the Board were not committed to taking these options forward. He hoped that this would lead to the creation of an 'ideal' management plan.

Dr Tait stated that there was value in the fact that some areas of woodland had not been over managed and allowed to grow naturally. He went on to say that unmanaged woodland could be interesting from a conservation point of view. There followed a short discussion regarding the value of some areas of woodland being left unmanaged and how it would be identified in the plan.

Mr Spicer commented that an element of financial sustainability should be included in the document along with a financial fall-back position. It was noted that 'enhanced' would be a better word to use than 'increased' in section 3.5 and that the words 'identify options should funds become available' be used.

There was a short discussion and agreement about the priorities to be established in the document: rhododendron clearance, ride management and dangerous trees.

The Clerk asked if there was any indication of the longevity of the new Forestry Commission grant system and Mr Harding replied that no substantial changes were envisaged until 2013. Half of the funds for the system came from the EU.

**It was agreed that ESUS be instructed to prepare a financially viable management plan with priorities, as listed, within the current budget; that ESUS prepare detailed costed options, in priority order, should further funding become available while ensuring the Board were not committed to taking these options forward; that advice be given on**

**areas of non-intervention; that an element of financial sustainability should be included within the document with a financial fall-back position; that ‘enhanced’ be used rather than ‘increased’ in section 3.5; that the words ‘identify options should funds become available’ also be included and that item 3 be deleted.**

**15/08 Review of the comments about conservation made at the recent round of stakeholder meetings**

The Chairman stated that this was a helpful summary of the feedback. He went on to say he was unsurprised that some well-known issues kept coming up and that many views conflicted.

Mr Cooper commented that the Board was committed to communicating better and that no comments from the stakeholders should be dismissed. He went on to say there should be a firmer commitment to education in the Forest Plan.

Cllr Barnes commented that there was a need to look closely at communication and how we can improve. He stated that a separate chapter containing a robust communications strategy was required and that such a strategy forces careful consideration of how an organisation communicates with the public.

The Clerk reported that, at the stakeholder meetings, it was very clear only a small percentage had actually read the Forest Plan. Cllr Hoy replied that many were only interested in single issues and did not listen to the answers given; he thought that parish magazines should be utilised. The Chairman stated that the local media uptake was disappointing but that local meetings had been very helpful.

Mr Stenhouse stated that that plan, in his opinion, contained no ‘vision’, that the introduction was boring and too long. Mr Cooper stated he strongly disagreed with Mr Stenhouse’s view. He went on to say that it was frustrating that, in regard to communication, things the Board said it would do had not yet happened, for example using the parish magazines. The Clerk reported that all the addresses of the parish, local church and community magazines had been acquired and that the parish magazines had been used successfully to communicate about the stakeholder meetings. Cllr Barnes suggested that a member of the Board should speak, if invited, at the annual parish assemblies and that a speaker’s brief be compiled. The content was already available but the presentation needed to be improved.

There was a discussion on how to increase public information on issues such as why heathland management was carried out; the history and definition of ‘Forest’; the evolution of the Forest landscape; the close herded shepherding project; the Vachery; the meaning of ‘favourable condition’; the lack of understanding of basic ecology and science. Information was also needed about the 60/40 ratio, the legal framework the Board works under and that woodland was taken as seriously as heathland. There was a short discussion that the public should be made aware that the Board were not removing deer cover or stopping dog walking.

Cllr Barnes suggested that the Board should be supplying material to the media but that we should be aware that journalists would ‘hack it around’ and get things wrong.

Mr Stenhouse stated that there was a need to justify why trees are being felled and a lively discussion followed.

**16/08 The effect of the Board’s felling policy on local residents**

There was a discussion on policy surrounding tree felling at roadsides and light pollution. It was suggested by Cllr Barnes that this was an area where a policy could be devised to take into account potential light pollution problems. The Clerk queried if it was the duty of the Board to

leave trees to protect properties from headlights and there was a distinction between properties on the Forest, by the roads and those, for example, in Hartfield.

The Chairman suggested that when felling was close to houses consideration to light pollution could be given without making any commitment. Mr Marrable stated that the policy had been refined and reported that gorse, as well as trees, could also have a screening effect. Cllr Barnes said fine tuning the policy was useful and that though gorse levels could be adjusted it was more suited to screening walks, where houses were concerned, trees were the better option.

There was a discussion on surface water run-off. Mr Spicer stated that part of Sandy Lane drive had been washed away and that nearby felling may have contributed. He asked that thought be given to surface water run-off and drainage before any future works are carried out and that consideration be given to the residents when any work is performed.

## **17/08 Conservation reports**

### *17.1/08 Heathland winter work update*

Mr Marrable reported that all works would be completed by the end of the week. There had been some delays due to the tractor being out of service. Area D would be placed under the woodland management plan as it could not be restored to heathland. Area H was not done due to tractor problems and area K will be carried over to next year.

Cllr Barnes asked that maps be placed on the website and that some labelling was required to assist the public with reading the map. There followed a short discussion on OS map copyright issues.

### *17.2/08 Progress on the grazing trial, with an update on the effectiveness of the process*

Mr Stenhouse commented on the costs of the trial so far and stated he hoped a full technical report would be provided. Cllr Barnes stated he would welcome an interim report to 'take stock' at the end of the year. Mr Marrable replied that reports needed to be scheduled and an annual report would be produced in due course. Mr Marrable reminded the Committee that the project had only been running for 10 months, that there had been unavoidable delays such as Blue Tongue restrictions, but that an immense amount had been learned about practicalities. Mr Spicer asked at what stage the Board would be able to see if the project was feasible and what it was costing. He also asked about the recruitment of an assistant.

The Clerk confirmed Mr Marrable's comment that much had been learned, for example, could a flock be set up, yes it could? What the public perception was? Very good as the Sheep Days had proven. On the question of the effect on vegetation, a technical report would be provided later following a summer period required for assessment.

Dr Tait emphasised that the biological benefits of grazing do not need to be established as the facts are not in any doubt, what a report needs to show is the practical aspects of the project and the financial viability. He went on to say the project was being funded as a nationally important trial. Cllr Barnes responded that he would still like to see some analysis even though the science was proven.

### *17.3/08 Back burning training exercise*

There were no comments made about this exercise undertaken jointly with East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service behind Long car park.

17.4/08 *Heathland management planning document*

The Chairman reported that this was a lengthy and detailed document that he was happy to share and go through with anyone who was interested. Mr Marrable stated that CMS7 was an industry standard and rather complicated. Cllr Barnes stated he would like to see this, even though it was not completed, on the website and available to the villages, parishes and libraries in the future.

#### **18/08 Archaeological dig**

The Clerk reported that Chris Butler was undertaking a dig at Camp Hill. Trenches were put across WWI and WWII trenches and a 1793 kitchen mound. Mr Marrable reported that there had been only minor finds. The weather had proven problematic. The trenches were alongside a ride and there had been interest from passing members of the public. The next stage would be to write a management plan for archaeological sensitive sites to determine best practice in such areas. This would be provided within the next two months.

#### **19/08 Mountain biking on the Forest**

There was a lengthy discussion on mountain biking and it was noted that this issue had been discussed four years ago. Dr Tait stated that he had looked at a paper relating to mountain biking on the Dorset heathlands and that there were concerns that mountain biking caused erosion. He went on to say that Natural England considered this a potential threat but that was general and not quantified. The Chairman asked if it was presumed that Natural England would object and Dr Tait replied that mountain biking was specified by them as one of several threats. There was a short discussion on the damage caused by mountain biking, walking and horses and it was agreed that mountain biking would be adding further pressure.

There was a short discussion on mountain biking on the South Downs and Dr Tait reported that though the habitat was different there were some conflicts with other users. He went on to say although there was a push by ESCC to promote cycling it was directed at utility rather than leisure.

Mr Stenhouse commented that some mountain bikers dug areas to make bumps and hollows to cycle over and that altering the topography would be a serious concern.

It was noted that there was, at the Commoners Meeting, an overwhelmingly anti-mountain biking stance.

The Clerk reported that the local pressure to have mountain biking was quite low and it was not mentioned at any Stakeholder meeting other than an eloquent few at Crowborough. There was a short discussion on policing and it was agreed this was a matter more suitable for RPA.

**It was agreed that there was no reason for the Conservation Committee to change its current position on mountain biking on the Forest as there was concern that rather than substituting a pressure it would present an additional one.**

#### **20/08 Any urgent item for which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman.**

The Chairman read to the Committee a letter of hearty congratulation from Natural England regarding HLS. The Chairman stated that this was a credit to the foresight of this Committee. Cllr Barnes suggested that a copy of the letter should be sent to the Leader and Chief Executive of ESCC and be placed on the website.

*The meeting closed at 16.55*